

MISSION SAN RAFAEL ARCANGEL
(La Mision del Gloriosisimo Principe San Rafael, Arcangel)
1104 Fifth Avenue
San Rafael
Marin County
California

HALS CA-87
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20240-0001

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Location: 1104 Fifth Avenue, San Rafael, Marin County, California

Lat: 37.974514 Long: -122.527981 (Front facade of church, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84)

Significance: The chain of 21 missions built in California between 1769 and 1823 represents some of California's earliest European habitation. Mission construction began while California was still controlled by Spain — long before Mexico gained control in 1821 or the United States took possession in 1846. As each mission was dedicated it formed the core of a new community, many of which grew into major California cities — San Diego, San Luis Obispo, San Francisco, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz and San Rafael all began as missions. Some mission sites were abandoned.

Originally built in 1817 as a sanitarium for the sick of the Missions San Francisco, San Jose, and Santa Clara, the Asistencia San Rafael, later Mission San Rafael Arcangel, was situated in the warmer, drier climate north of Yerba Buena (San Francisco). It is the last of the Spanish built Franciscan Missions. The chapel, dormitories, and rooms for the sick were completed in 1823. It was also thought that a presence in the North Bay would deter expansion of the Russian Colony at Fort Ross, north of Bodega Bay. The Asistencia is considered to be the first hospital, church, school and justice court in Marin County. It was one of the only California missions to be completely destroyed and rebuilt.

Description: The two buildings of the original complex formed an "L" shape and faced east towards the bay and sun rise. The new construction was sited down slope and oriented to the west facing the sunset. The orchards that had been planted down slope from the church are now the office buildings of downtown San Rafael. The mission and church buildings that once towered above their surroundings are no longer the tallest buildings in the area. Fourth Street terminates at the foot of the steps leading to the church's entry plaza. Fifth Avenue runs in front of the current complex with a sidewalk, street trees, and a raised planting bed providing a buffer from the passing traffic.

Replicas of the mission bells hang on a wooden structure at the entrance of the chapel. The reconstructed versions, donated by the Native Sons of the Golden West in 1909, were placed to the left of the chapel entrance and reoriented with the modern replica building. The original bells are kept inside the mission museum.

The plaza, not an original element to the mission, was added in the twentieth century, most likely with the construction of the replica building and the rectory. Per city records, the rectory predated the mission replica but a construction date is unclear. The plaza has a significant slope from the church entrance down to Fifth Avenue. This slope is not as apparent in historic photos and images. The plaza includes monuments to Fra. Junipero Serra and Chief Marin. The statue of Fra. Junipero Serra can be found on the side of the mission facing Fifth Avenue.

At the entrance of the plaza there are a couple steps up from the sidewalk; these are flanked by two planting beds. The planting bed east of these steps has a mature date palm with a metal girder and flowering perennials such as lantana and salvia. Shrubs and small trees include Japanese maple, dracaena, and boxwood. Further east along Fifth Avenue there is a small lawn with a pink stucco sign, El Camino Real Bell, roses, and agapanthus. The retaining wall is grey stone, only appearing in photos after the most recent iteration of the church.

A large, dark green shrub anchors the planting bed to the west of the entry steps, opposite the date palm. Also in this bed are a Japanese maple, agapanthus, and another large date palm at the westernmost end. As one enters the plaza, the planting bed continues on the western side, and is planted with a mix of shrubs including boxwood, star jasmine, two short palms, and an evergreen shrub.

There is a small planting bed, just west of the center of the plaza that has a medium size London Plane Tree with an annual planting mix including primroses and begonia. Opposite the London Plane, there is a round planting bed with a Washington Fan Palm and more annual planting mix. The two beds flanking the steps up to the parish church are planted with two small Crepe myrtle, rose shrubs, and bougainvillea. The retaining walls for these beds are stucco and match the church building. The stairs have metal handrails.

History: Asistencia San Rafael, later Mission San Rafael Arcangel, was built in 1817 and named for Saint Raphael, Angel of Bodily Healing. Initially a sanitarium and health retreat for neophyte parishioners from San Francisco, San Jose and Santa Clara, it was officially declared a mission in 1822. A farm and grazing land was laid out; crops included grapes, wheat, corn, beans, and chickpeas. A pear orchard was planted by the Padres that would later be the last remnant of the original mission. The mission complex itself was comprised of two buildings, the chapel in one, the dormitories, school, hospital, and priests' quarters in the other. The two buildings formed an "L" shape and faced east towards the bay and sun rise. Construction was started by Fra. Gil y Taboada, also the Mission's first doctor, and completed by Fra. Juan Amoros in 1823 with a dedication the following year. At its height in 1828, the Mission San Rafael had an estimated population of over 1,000 people.

Mission San Rafael and the mission just north in Sonoma were the farthest outposts in Spanish California. In 1821, with Mexico's independence from Spain, the missions shifted to Mexican control. By 1832, Mexico began secularizing the missions with San Rafael being the first to close in 1834. After secularization, the mission was briefly abandoned before General Fremont of the United States occupied the Mission San Rafael using the chapel as a stable for his horses. In 1850, California was granted statehood and the missions again transferred to a new authority.

The final transfer was in 1855 when the Mission San Rafael was returned to the Catholic Church under the Archdiocese of San Francisco, buildings in ruin and a single pear tree all that remained of the original mission. A wooden church was built near the site of the original mission chapel in 1861 but was later destroyed to make way for a growing population. By 1869, the St. Raphael's Parish built a new, gothic style church on the site. The old church and mission was sketched by Eduard Vischer circa 1878, and a print is available at the UC Berkeley Bancroft Library. In 1884, the marked graves were moved and the cemetery closed. The Saint Raphael School was constructed to the east of the gothic church in 1889. The school is depicted in a circa 1915 photograph available in the Marin County Free Library's Anne T. Kent California Room. The school was moved to the back of the property, near Mission Street, in 1926.

At the turn of the twentieth century there was increased interest in the mission revival movement and the history of the California missions. In 1909, the Native Sons of the Golden West erected the replica mission bell structure to commemorate the history of the site. In 1919, the gothic church burned down in a suspected arson, and the current parish church was rebuilt in the mission revival style. It was not until 1949 when the Hearst Foundation funded the construction of a replica of the original Mission San Rafael Arcangel that there was once again a mission in San Rafael.

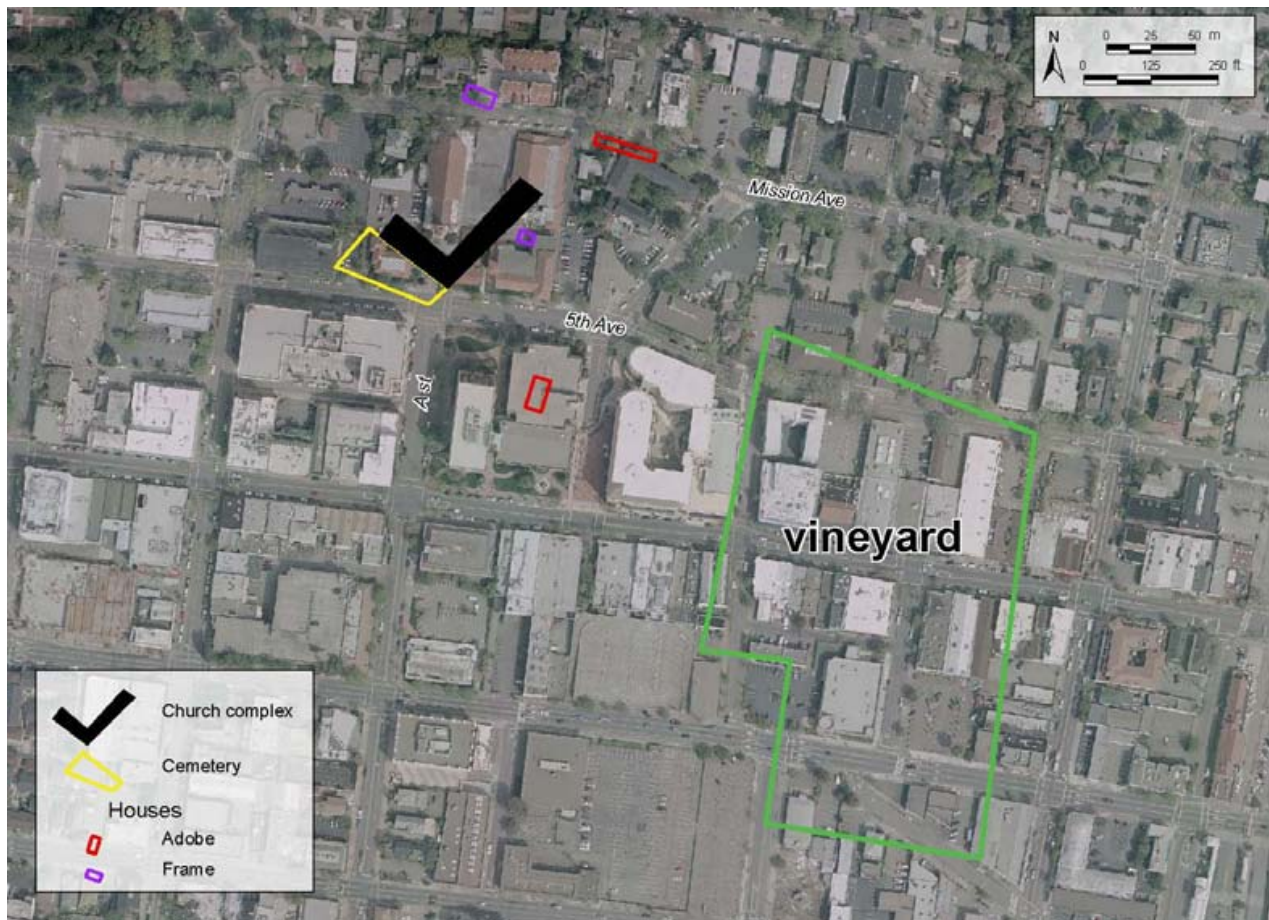
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July 17, 2012



Historic Mission San Rafael layout over present day aerial image (DeBaker 2012)



Fra. Serra Statue in front of mission (APDW July 19, 2012).



El Camino Real Bell (APDW July 19, 2012).



1909 replica mission bells (APDW July 19, 2012).



Historic date palm identified in 1949 Plan
(APDW July 19, 2012).



Stone wall (APDW July 19, 2012).



Undated wood cross (APDW July 19, 2012).



1954 San Rafael Arcangel plaque (APDW July 19, 2012).



San Rafael Arcangel plaque (APDW July 19, 2012).



1949 San Rafael Arcangel chapel plaque (APDW July 19, 2012).



1954 Chief Marin rock plaque at front of mission (APDW July 19, 2012).